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4 Nov 1973

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: An Opportunity in Cambodia?

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A critical period is fast approaching in Cambodia. The rainy season is coming to an end, the countryside is beginning to dry out, and the Khmer Communists (KC) are in the early stages of planning for a major offensive. In the past few weeks, it has become abundantly clear that the KC are determined to bring down the Lon Nol government during this dry season. They made this as clear as they knew how in a peculiarly pointed and frank "birthday greeting" to Sihanouk on 26 October. What is also clear from the message is that the KC is determined to force a military solution to the Cambodian problem even over the objections of their friends and allies--Sihanouk himself, China, the Soviet Union, and apparently, also Hanoi.

Evidence has been accumulating for some time that there is considerable disagreement on the other side regarding the proper strategy in Cambodia. As far back as early July, the KC command was stating [redacted] that they were under heavy pressure from their "friends" (i.e., Hanoi and Peking) to negotiate, but that they would press on with their offensive anyway. In September, Sihanouk indicated that Hanoi had terminated (or at least cut back) its logistic support to the KC. This too [redacted]

In his interview

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with T. D. Allmann, Sihanouk also stated that it was up to the

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US to decide whether it wanted a Communist Cambodia. Our view is that Sihanouk was making an offer that he hoped Washington could not refuse, i.e. work with him to put the screws to the KC. (There is precedent for Sihanouk operating in this fashion; his interview with Stanley Karnow in 1967 paved the way for US B-52 strikes against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.)

We do not think it too farfetched to believe that Sihanouk would, with the support of Peking, Hanoi, and Moscow, deal with the US behind the backs of the KC. The KC are deathly afraid that he is already doing precisely that. A compromise would not be easy. Sihanouk would demand that Lon Nol, Sirik Matak and a few others leave Cambodia, and he would ^{offer no} ~~A~~ clearcut guarantees that Cambodia would become truly neutral, i.e. keep the Vietnamese Communists from using its territory against South Vietnamese.

If something were worked out, however, it would be entirely possible for Sihanouk to return to Phnom Penh as the head of a new government, and rally behind him his one time supporters in the GKR (many, if not most, of whom are clearly ready to take him back) and his supporters in the insurgent ranks. In some ways, Sihanouk would become the Souvanna Phouma of Cambodia. The hard core leadership of the KC would be forced to either go along or continue the insurgency--but without the benefit of Sihanouk's popularity in the villages and without the benefit of significant external support.

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Obviously the foregoing scenario, or any of its possible variations, would not work if Peking and Hanoi, and to a lesser extent, Moscow, objected. We think Peking would pose no significant problem. The Chinese have long viewed Sihanouk as a means to limit North Vietnamese and Soviet influence in Cambodia, and they have supported the idea of negotiations in Cambodia since at least the beginning of this year. The Soviets have also come around to the view that Sihanouk's return may be better than any other alternative. Hanoi's position is more problematical. We think, however, that the evidence is growing that the North Vietnamese do not want a major crisis in Cambodia this year. This is what they are saying in Paris. They have even gone so far as to say that Sihanouk is the "only solution" for Cambodia. Far more important, we think that there is evidence, both on the ground in Cambodia [redacted]

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[redacted] that

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Hanoi is not giving the KC the arms and ammunition it wants for an all-out offensive this year.

Even if this is so, there remains the problem of whether Hanoi can get the KC to forego an offensive this year. The evidence suggests that while it undoubtedly exercises considerable influence with the KC, it does not give them orders. Even if Hanoi cuts off the logistic flow, it is entirely possible that the KC have enough stockpiles, and can purchase and capture enough arms and ammunition to mount a major offensive that will bring down the Lon Nol government.

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Any effort to pursue negotiations with the idea of making a deal before the issue is settled on the battlefield may be, at this late hour, exceedingly difficult. But in view of the shaky position of the Lon Nol government, it may be an effort worth making, nonetheless. At a minimum, it would be very useful for the future, assuming that the GKR gets through this dry season, to find out if there is a general consensus among the major actors on the future of Cambodia. Moreover, a tangible expression of US interest at this juncture might have some effect on how hard Hanoi is willing to press the KC to negotiate or on exactly how much or how little material support Hanoi is willing to give in the next few months.

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